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Anyone Here Know Mr. Agca?

One by one, they took the microphone in the ballroom of the Moskva Park Hotel in Sofia—to declare their innocence. “I had nothing to do with the crime committed against the pontiff,” insisted Teodorov Ayvazov, the Bulgarian whose phone number was found in gunman Mehmet Ali Agca’s pocket. “I have never met Mr. Agca,” said Bekir Celenk, the Turk who allegedly bank-rolled him. “I know my husband best. He has not the heart to have anything to do with such an inhuman act,” pleaded Rositsa Antonova, whose husband, Sergei, a Bulgarian airline official, is accused of arranging the getaway and is under arrest in Rome. A mob of 270 journalists craned forward as the impresario of the press conference vowed that whoever wanted to kill Pope John Paul II, it wasn’t Bulgaria. The Bulgarian people, said press official Boyan Traikov, were too devoted to “sublime striving for creating a new socialist society” to have time for terrorism.

Traikov invited Italian investigators to come interview his guests for themselves. But that was not enough to satisfy the Italians; they poured out new disclosures of alleged Bulgarian complicity in the assassination plot and a host of other crimes. Italian newspapers reported that Agca now claims that the Bulgarians also wanted him to add Poland’s Lech Walesa to a bizarre hit list that included Queen Elizabeth II, Malta’s Prime Minister Dom Mintoff and Simone Veil, the president of the European Parliament. Prime Minister Amin-tore Fanfani “froze” relations between the two countries and said that Parliament would poke more deeply into “the Bulgarian affair.” Bulgaria retaliated by announcing that two Italian tourists held for spying since last summer would be tried behind closed doors in Sofia.

Warmth: Italian investigators still were not officially blaming the government of Bulgaria, but they said that Agca traveled freely there, got his instructions and a gun in Sofia and was guided by Bulgarians in Rome. As the scandal grew, Italian newspapers also reported that the government was investigating Bulgarian links to the murder

of Aldo Moro, the kidnapping of Brig. Gen. James Dozier and to a Masonic-lodge scandal last year. Evidence was sketchy, but each alleged Bulgarian connection was also an implicit link to Moscow. Bulgaria is the Soviet Union’s closest ally, the only East European country that feels genuine warmth for the Russians, who freed Bulgaria from Turkish domination a century ago. The cultures, economies and political systems of the two countries are all similar and closely tied—and so are their security agencies, the KGB and the DS. “The question is not whether there is cooperation between the KGB and the DS,” Stefan Svirdelev, a former colonel in the DS who defected in 1971, told NEWSWEEK. “The fact is that the DS is subordinate to the Soviets and takes its orders from them.”

Despite Traikov’s protestations of national innocence, Bulgaria presented an easy target for Italian investigators because it has been engaged in so many shady activi-

ties. Bulgarian defector Georgi Markov was murdered in London in 1978, shot with a tiny poison pellet fired from an umbrella. When Nicaragua expected to receive Soviet-made MiG’s, it sent 50 pilots to Bulgaria for training. Bulgaria is a pipeline for narcotics traveling from Turkey, Iran and Afghanistan to Western Europe. A Bulgarian government front company is widely believed to be selling arms to both sides in the Iran-Iraq war, and Bulgarian smugglers are a major source of arms for Turkish terrorists. There are also reports of terrorist and PLO training camps in the country. After the PLO evacuated Beirut, Bulgarian television broadcast film of hundreds of PLO fighters arriving in Sofia.

Even so, knowledgeable intelligence officials in the United States, Israel and West Germany are skeptical of an official Bulgarian role in the assassination plot. One U.S. intelligence source pointed out that most of the Bulgarian connection so far has only been alleged by Agca himself. And as Antonov’s lawyer, Giuseppe Consolo, said last week: “Who is going to believe the man who shot the pope?” But at this point, a lot of people are at least listening to him—and there are likely to be more allegations before anyone knows who is really telling the truth.

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JOHN BRECHER with ZOFIA SMARDZ in Sofia,
CAROLYN FRIDAY in Rome and DAVID C. MARTIN
in Washington